
Address to the Members of the
Northern Ireland Assembly
by the Secretary of State of the
United States of America,
Mrs Hillary Clinton.

Monday 12 October 2009

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Mr Speaker: First Minister and deputy First Minister, Madam Secretary, Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, one of the most enjoyable aspects of the job of Speaker is welcoming the many visitors who come to Parliament Buildings. I am delighted that there are so many. Some come to express support for what we do in this place. Others come in the hope of learning from it. All such visits represent an interest in working together internationally to achieve common aims.

In recent years, Members of this Assembly have enjoyed opportunities to listen to addresses by leading political figures from within these islands and elsewhere in Europe. We have also enjoyed and benefited from visits of leaders in politics and business from the United States, all of whom have shown a tremendous commitment to the political and economic development of this part of the world, as well as their own. Among these have been US Congressmen, Senators and mayors, and while in the Office of President, President Clinton. Circumstances at the time of his visit were such that a gathering like today's was not possible. But, today, we meet together as an Assembly, the Members of which on all sides have shown, and continue to show, a commitment to make politics work in Northern Ireland.

As they have done so, they have received much support and encouragement from the United States of America, from its political and economic leaders. Real and lasting partnerships have been developed, and we hope to continue to build on those in the years ahead.

It is with that in mind this morning that it gives me great pleasure to welcome to our Assembly Chamber the US Secretary of State, Mrs Hillary Clinton. Madam Secretary, this is not your first visit to Northern Ireland, so we are mindful that your coming here today reflects your ongoing personal commitment, as well as

the commitment of the US Administration, to the political, social, and economic development of Northern Ireland. I am delighted that you accepted my invitation to address Members of our Assembly this morning.

I call upon you, Madam Secretary, to address the Members.

[Applause.]

The Secretary of State of the United States of America (Mrs Hillary Clinton): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for your very warm welcome, but, indeed, it is I who is honoured today to be here in this Assembly, in this beautiful land that represents so much, not only to my country, but, indeed, to the world. It is a place where bullets have been traded for ballots, where ancient hatreds have yielded to new hopes and the promise of a lasting peace has given people permission, after years of uncertainty and despair, not just to dream again of a better future for yourselves and your children, but to act on those dreams.

Let me first pay tribute to the leadership of Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, your First Minister and your deputy First Minister, and also to the other party leaders, Mark Durkan, Reg Empey, David Ford, Dawn Purvis and Gerry Adams. Thank you for all that you are doing. I am told that here we also have two other men who have been instrumental in the history of Northern Ireland, Dr Ian Paisley and John Hume. I welcome them and thank them for what they have done.

We meet at an important time in the history of Northern Ireland. In the 11 years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, you have travelled a long way together on the road to peace. Armed groups have laid down their weapons; empty streets are now bustling with activity; and here in this Chamber, men and women who were once sworn enemies work side by side to secure the achievements of recent years and to deliver a stable, prosperous future to the people you represent.

These accomplishments are remarkable and are a credit to you and to all those who have worked for peace, not only the leaders here at Stormont, but at Westminster and Leinster House. But, most importantly, they are a credit to the thousands of ordinary citizens, mothers and fathers, whose determination to end the Troubles made them fervent activists for peace.

At this time, we can recognise you have travelled a great distance. However, you do not need me to tell you that your journey is not yet over. The promise of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement is not yet fully realised. Northern Ireland is now facing a new challenge with the global economic

downturn, which threatens some of the gains that you have made in the past decade.

The value of peace is not only the absence of violence, it is the presence of new opportunities for investment and jobs, for education, healthcare and political participation. So, it is critical, in this moment of economic turmoil, to protect the progress you have already achieved and to build upon it to ensure that your people continue to enjoy the rewards of peace and to embrace it for the long term.

Since this Assembly was restored two and a half years ago, devolution has enabled you to work together to enact sensible, necessary reforms on everything from health to housing to environmental safety. No one ever said it was going to be easy. Of course it is difficult. It is the nature of democracy. It is not easy in any legislature, as I know from experience, under the best of circumstances. But, in these circumstances, the work you have done is all the more extraordinary.

So, please know that the Obama Administration and the United States is committed to helping you to finish your journey, to put far behind you the long years of division and conflict, to build confidence and trust across all communities and political parties and to honour the hopes and sacrifices of your people by making whole and permanent Northern Ireland's emerging peace.

Now, we know what it means to be supportive. We also know what it means to meddle. I want to be clear that when it comes to the important issue of devolution of policing and justice, that is a decision for this Assembly to make. But as a true friend — and I thank the Speaker for his kind comments — my hope is that you will achieve what you have set out to do, to complete the process of devolution. I am confident that together you can go forward and harness the exciting human and economic potential that Northern Ireland has to offer.

I know there has been considerable effort in recent weeks to address concerns and work toward a resolution during this important period. There have been many moments in Northern Ireland's peace journey when progress seemed difficult, when every route forward was blocked and there seemed to be nowhere to go. But you have always found a way to do what you believed was right for the people of Northern Ireland. As scripture urges us:

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

Today, Northern Ireland stands as an example to the world of how even the staunchest adversaries can overcome differences to work together for the common and greater good. So I encourage you to move forward now with that same spirit of unstoppable grit and resolve, and I pledge that the United States will be

behind you all the way as you work toward peace and stability that lasts.

In recent months, more paramilitary groups have made the decision to decommission their weapons, a necessary act that is critical for peace. But, the killings this March of police constable Stephen Carroll and soldiers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar remind us that there are still those looking to seize any opportunity to undermine the process and to destabilise this Government.

Now they are watching this Assembly for signs of uncertainty or internal disagreement. They want to derail your confidence, and though they are small in number, their thuggish tactics and destructive ambitions threaten the security of every family in Northern Ireland. Moving ahead together with the process will leave them stranded on the wrong side of history.

Of course, the best guard against those bent on dragging Northern Ireland back to the past is not an edict from the top, but the day-to-day faith and fortitude of the people of Northern Ireland. In the days after the killings, the world watched and prayed that a new period of violence would not erupt. In fact, the murders had the opposite effect. Ordinary people, Catholics and Protestants alike, marched together in vigils, attended interfaith services and declared with one voice their refusal to go back to the old ways and their insistence on looking to a brighter future. The killings could have been the start of a backward slide. Instead, they proved to the world and to each of you how far you have come.

I know the divisions within Northern Ireland are not fully healed. Even today, many Catholics and Protestants live segregated lives — separate schools, separate neighborhoods, some still divided by walls. But given time, and given the leadership that each of you can provide, the torn fabric of society will be woven together, stitch by stitch, choice by choice.

The people of Northern Ireland have given this Assembly a powerful mandate. And you, in turn, have accepted the responsibility to summon the highest qualities of leadership and to repay the faith that the people have vested in you with lasting results. That means not just completing devolution, but using your authorities wisely, as you have been, to build a thriving society where people can live free from fear, where parents can raise healthy families, where every child can receive a high-quality education and all people, no matter their religion or their political beliefs, have the chance to make the most of their God-given potential.

We have already seen, first-hand, how peace helps promote economic growth and opportunity. After the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland's economy took off: unemployment fell, house prices rose, new

businesses flourished. International investment increased as well. Since the ceasefires of the 1990s, the number of US companies in Northern Ireland has increased by 150%. US investment alone has increased employment by creating 20,000 jobs here since 1994. Our businesses have long been interested in investing, but it was your commitment to peace that finally made it possible.

Across the world, as the Speaker referenced, Northern Ireland is seen as a model of how resolving conflict can lead to genuine progress and material improvements in people's lives. So, in the face of the economic downturn, it is essential to protect and strengthen the progress you have made by enacting smart reforms, investing in your people and in health and education and job-training services, encouraging entrepreneurship and continuing to attract foreign investment.

Here again, your commitment to a permanent peace based on the principles and agreements you have adopted must be unequivocal and unwavering. Northern Ireland's success in the competitive global economy depends on investors believing that you will do all you can to maintain political stability and public safety, just as your success in keeping the trust of your people relies on your ability to prove that peace leads to meaningful improvements in their lives. Peace and economic progress should go hand in hand.

The United States will continue to strongly support your efforts to provide greater opportunities. We intend to increase our economic engagement. Later today, our new economic envoy, Declan Kelly, and I will meet with business leaders from the United States and Northern Ireland who have agreed to increase business-to-business collaboration between our people.

Establishing a lasting peace, building a strong economy, creating the conditions for a healthy, flourishing society — none of this is easy, and the work is never done. Indeed, none of these goals are final destinations. You have to keep working at them day by day. That certainly is a lesson we have learned over the 230 years in our own country, and we keep relearning them all the time. We, too, have struggled to achieve unity.

My country has long felt a special connection with Northern Ireland. Many Americans, as you know so well, have ancestral ties to this land. They have family and friends who still live here. So, helping to bring peace is a point of national pride, and for many of us, it also has great personal meaning.

For me, this is very personal. My husband and I came here in 1995. Bill was deeply invested in forging the Good Friday Agreement before and in the years since. I came here as First Lady and then as a Senator from New York, and I joined with every American in

celebrating the signing of the St Andrews Agreement. By the way, every year I was in the Senate, I had an intern from Northern Ireland, one of whom came back and ran for office herself.

Over the years, Bill and I have had the privilege of meeting many of you. I learned that peace is not only made in the halls of government, but at kitchen tables, in local pubs, schoolyards, workplaces and in the hearts of people in every neighbourhood.

Changing hearts is the hardest work of all. It is hard for an individual and harder still for a community, where every loss or injustice, pain or resentment is magnified. But, leaders like all of you are elected to offer a choice between allegiance to a past that cannot be changed and commitment to a different future that you shape.

When Bill and I first came to Belfast, we stayed at the Europa Hotel, as I have again this time, even though then there were sections boarded up because of damage from bombs. We went to the City Hall, as I will later today, for the lighting of the Christmas tree. There were people stretched in all directions, as far as I could see: mothers clutching babies, fathers with children on their shoulders, all with upraised faces. I have carried that image in my mind over the past 14 years. I have wondered about the children whose lives were changed, and maybe even saved, because many of you took risks for peace.

This peace is yours. People in this Hall have the power to secure and sustain it for generations to come. I pray that you succeed, and I pledge that we will stand with you as you do the hard work of building a future of peace and prosperity for people who so richly deserve it.

May God bless you and sustain you in this important work. Thank you all very much.

[Applause.]



